

Sandra Mendelsohn Rubin

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Sandra Mendelsohn Rubin

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That Sandra Mendelsohn Rubin's paintings appear to replicate scenes from everyday life with photographic fidelity is a testament to the artist's mastery of technique and to her heightened sensitivity to "that daily drama of common motifs and common things."¹ Her accomplishments are all the more impressive when one considers that, despite the apparent photographic exactitude of her canvases, Rubin does not work from photographs. "A photograph doesn't take in the detail that you see," she explains, "and you don't have the experience of being in the presence of and being able to make decisions about what you see. With a photograph there's just so much information missing. . . I work from life. There doesn't seem to be any substitute for that. And all the decision-making aspects of putting together the picture come from being in the presence of it. I just can't do anything with a photograph."

Painting directly from life, Rubin—through her compositions as well as her treatment of light and color—communicates the essence of being on the site or in the space depicted. "Above and beyond the visual accuracy, it is the smell of the air and the sound of the atmosphere that I am *really* trying to capture."²

Rubin has outfitted a small truck as a traveling studio, which allows her to work on site. After selecting her subject, the artist works out the composition in a drawing, which she subsequently transfers to canvas. At this stage, proportion is key. On occasion Rubin first creates a small-scale oil study of the subject, which serves as a model for the full-size work (e.g., *Santa Monica Bay from Malibu—Study*, *Santa Monica Bay from Malibu: Apartment at Dusk—Study*, *Apartment at Dusk*). The proportions, however, remain constant from study to final painting. At other times she paints directly at full scale. Her process is a painstaking one, and it frequently takes Rubin several months to complete a canvas.

Although Rubin's technique recreates specific details with exactitude, she chooses her subjects not for their individuality but for their universality. She has always lived and worked near Santa Monica, California, and as a runner, she has come to know the surrounding landscape intimately. In fact, running has influenced her work significantly. It is, she says, "one of the things that's really gotten me into landscape; I do a lot of long-distance running and have really explored this area here on foot."

Paintings such as *Santa Monica Canyon* attest to a familiarity with the landscape that has been acquired through careful observation over a period of time. Other outdoor scenes, such as *Low Clouds* and *Back View from the Studio*, depict the urban landscape seen from the artist's studio in Venice, California. Rubin's interior scenes, such as *The Letter* and *Studio Interior*, similarly reflect directly on people, objects, and events in the artist's life. Despite these personal references, it is not necessary for the viewer to know the site depicted or to understand the relationships referred to in a particular canvas. The emotional bond between



Studio Interior, 1983

spectator and landscape, the sensations of loneliness, expectancy, or familiarity are common to us all.

Rubin's interest in skies and clouds, evident in *Northern California Landscape* and *Low Clouds*, can be linked to that of John Constable, the early nineteenth-century British romantic painter, who investigated clouds and other atmospheric phenomena scientifically, creating a whole series of what he called "skying studies." Rubin has in fact studied Constable's work and has read his letters and his notations about weather conditions. Like Claude

Monet, Rubin has depicted the same scene under different light conditions, as in *Santa Monica Bay from Malibu—Detail and Malibu*. In their moody stillness and dark tones, her night paintings, such as *Apartment at Dusk*, are reminiscent of Edward Hopper's urban scenes, though they lack the dreamlike desolation and anomie present in Hopper's work, instead conveying a more objective sense of reality.

Rubin's realism thus differs from what has generally been termed realism over the years. In mid-nineteenth-century Europe realism connoted an avant-garde fascination with contemporary life, infused with a concern for social and political issues. In the United States during the 1920s and 1930s realism was associated with the regionalist painters of the American scene, often considered stylistically conservative, whose canvases depicted the common man and his surroundings, both urban and rural. More recently, American realism has been associated with the use of the photographic image as a springboard for painting. Because she works directly from the interiors and landscapes that surround her, Rubin's paintings become "a synthesis of repeated contacts; the final image is a record of these cumulative experiences."⁹ In this case familiarity has bred neither indifference nor contempt but has enhanced the artist's awareness of and responsiveness to the world around her.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, quotations are from an interview with the artist conducted by the author on February 7, 1985.

2. From the artist's journal, January 25, 1985.

3. From the artist's journal, February 10, 1985.

Checklist

Apartment Gate, 1980

Oil on canvas

60 × 44 in.

Collection of Aviva and Carl Covitz

Malibu Window, 1981

Oil on canvas

48 × 56 in.

Atlantic Richfield Corporate Art Collection

Santa Monica Bay from Malibu, 1981

Oil on canvas

54 × 156 in.

Collection of Tony Bill

Santa Monica Bay from Malibu—Study, 1981

Oil on canvas

11 × 32 in.

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore S. Hochstim, Dallas, Texas

Santa Monica Bay from Malibu—Detail, 1981

Oil on canvas

11 × 19 in.

Collection of Marcia Mohr

Stephen, 1981

Oil on canvas

16 × 20 in.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Modern and Contemporary Art Council, Young Talent Purchase Award

View from Big Rock, 1981

Oil on canvas

40 × 25 in.

Collection of Robert and Mary Looker

The Letter, 1982

Oil on canvas

36 × 48 in.

Collection of Nancy and Bernard Kattler

Santa Monica Canyon, 1982

Oil on canvas

40 × 25 in.

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Howard Blau

Malibu, 1983

Oil on canvas

11 × 19 in.

Collection of James and Laura Maslon

Northern California Landscape, 1983

Oil on canvas

18 × 11 in.

Collection of the artist, courtesy of L. A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California

Studio Interior, 1983

Oil on canvas

52 × 32 in.

Collection of the artist, courtesy of L. A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California, and Fischer Fine Arts, London

Low Clouds, 1984

Oil on canvas

33 × 45 in.

Collection of the artist, courtesy of L. A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California, and Fischer Fine Arts, London

Studio Interior with Anthuriums, 1984

Oil on canvas

18 × 10 in.

Collection of James and Linda Burrows

Apartment at Dusk, 1984–85

Oil on canvas

72 × 44 in.

Collection of the artist, courtesy of L. A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California, and Fischer Fine Arts, London

Apartment at Dusk—Study, 1984–85

Oil on canvas

24 × 14¼ in.

Collection of the artist, courtesy of L. A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California, and Fischer Fine Arts, London

Back View from the Studio, 1985

Oil on canvas

36 × 22 in.

Collection of the artist, courtesy of L. A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California, and Fischer Fine Arts, London



Low Clouds, 1984

Biography

- 1947 Born in Santa Monica, California.
- 1976 Receives B.A. from University of California, Los Angeles.
- 1979 Receives M.F.A. from University of California, Los Angeles.
- 1980 Receives Young Talent Award, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.
- 1981 Awarded Artist's Fellowship Grant, National Endowment for the Arts.

Solo Exhibition

- 1982 "Selected Paintings and Drawings from 1980–1982," L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1984 "American and European Painting, Drawing, and Sculpture," L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California
- 1983 "Young Talent Awards: 1963–1983," Los Angeles County Museum of Art (catalogue)
"L.A. Scene," University of Southern California, Los Angeles
"A Heritage Renewed," University Art Museum, Santa Barbara, California (catalogue)
- 1982 "The Real Thing," Laguna Beach Museum of Art, Laguna Beach, California (catalogue)
"The Michael and Dorothy Blankfort Collection," Los Angeles County Museum of Art (catalogue)
"Selected Graphics from L.A. Louver Publications," Venice, California," Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York

"Drawings by Painters," Long Beach Museum of Art, Long Beach, California; traveled to Mandeville Art Gallery, University of California, San Diego, and the Oakland Museum, Oakland, California (catalogue)

"Exhibition of Contemporary Los Angeles Artists," Nagoya City Museum, Nagoya, Japan; traveled to the Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles

- 1981 "Elegant Night," Security Pacific National Bank, Los Angeles (catalogue)
"The Figure and Its Postures," Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles
"Locations," California State University, San Bernardino (catalogue)
Odyssey Gallery, New York
"California: The State of Landscape 1972–1981," Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, California; traveled to Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, California (catalogue)
"Major Works by Six Artists," L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California
- 1980 "Three Realist Painters: Maxwell Hendler, Richard Shaffer, and Sandra Mendelsohn Rubin," L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California
- 1978 "15 Artists," Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art (LAICA), Los Angeles
Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), Los Angeles
"National Invitational: Drawing/Painting 1978," College Art Gallery, State University of New York, New Paltz (catalogue)
- 1977 "Images: Interior/Exterior," Municipal Art Gallery, Los Angeles

Selected References

- 1983 Plous, Phyllis. *A Heritage Renewed*, exh. cat. Santa Barbara: University Art Museum.
- 1982 Weisberg, Ruth. "An Impersonal Realism," *Artweek*, November 27.
Weisberg, Ruth. "Surveying Southern California Realist Painting," *Artweek*, June 5.
Muchnic, Suzanne. "L.A. Works on Exhibit via Nagoya, Japan," *Los Angeles Times*, April 19.
Muchnic, Suzanne. "Drawings by California Painters," *Los Angeles Times*, February 16.
- 1981 Fox, Louis. "Formalizing the City," *Artweek*, October 24.
- 1980 Rosenthal, Adrienne. "Human Emanations," *Artweek*, July 19.
Muchnic, Suzanne. "Realism: A Summer Spread Is Showing," *Los Angeles Times*, July 11.
Muchnic, Suzanne. "Artists Get Foot in Door," *Los Angeles Times*, June 2.



Santa Monica Bay from Malibu, 1981

- 1978 Muchnic, Suzanne. "A Dent in the Summer Blahs," *Los Angeles Times*, August 7
- Askey, Ruth. "Double X Curates Women's Show," *Artweek*, July 29.
- 1977 Seldis, Henry. "Art: Local Talents," *Los Angeles Times*, August 7

Cover: Apartment at Dusk, 1984-85

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Santa Monica Canyon, 1982